

or three thousand years had certainly taken their toll, but I no longer had any doubt that we had indeed discovered a path built by ancient hands.

The coincidence was eerie. No matter how I might try to logically explain away my prophetic painting, the stairway remained, objectively irrefutable evidence, crystallized on canvas.

By this point, I am disheartened to admit, my fate, and the fate of my friends, was sealed. I wish with all my heart that I had decided not to climb that dark path, but how could I have chosen otherwise? If you had been in my situation, would you not have done the same?

Our ascent up the mountain was slow, but despite the wind's determined resistance, we arrived at the summit, where I was quick to discover a man-sized cave entrance leading down into the dark heart of the mountain. I looked at Kira and Corbin, and they at me, then stepped as boldly as I could into the darkness.

The cave was claustrophobically narrow. Judging from the light trickling in, I discerned a passage winding about thirty meters back into the blackness. All along this narrow path, slabs of rock jutted dangerously from the ceiling and the floor. With myself in the lead, we stepped cautiously through this maze of sharpened stalactites. Twenty meters in, I stopped. Having stepped outside the range of the outside light, it became clear that the tunnel itself was illuminated by a variety of glowing fungus which coated the walls of the tunnel like fluorescent blue velvet.

Now that I could see some distance ahead, it was clear we were approaching the end of the passage, where the tunnel opened into a larger cavern.

As we approached the end of the tunnel, Kira called for me to stop. Not feeling entirely confident with my footing, I did as I was told. Kira reached up to grasp my shoulder, so I would know that she was there, and stepped past me, carefully, to the end of the tunnel. She reached up, tracing a line with her finger. There, etched in the granite, just below the entrance to the chamber, were a string of golden Greek words.

"House, no... Sanctuary... Nine... daughters... Zeus... Sanctuary of the Nine daughters of Zeus," she said, her tone tinged with awe. "The Muses."

I was taken aback. "You're not serious?"

"The mythological women who inspire the poets and the artists?" Corbin asked.

"The very same."

"This must be a dream," I whispered, as I stepped to the edge of the precipice.

The cavern was oval-shaped, about one hundred meters in circumference and thirty in height. A polished marble floor covered the majority of the cavern, running up to the edge of an underground river, which dropped off into the darkness under the impenetrable granite wall at the far side. The grim waterfall's melodic echo reverberated through the chamber, a disconcerting and tranquil hymn offered to the forgotten past. The ancient Greek term *aletheia*, translated as a not-forgetting, or truth, came to mind. Was our discovery of this magnificent cavern somehow related to a reawakening, or remembrance, of the forgotten truths of the past?

An impressively ornate golden doorway, covered in runes and sapphires, was set into the far granite wall. Eight tunnels circled the cavern very much like the eight points on a compass.

I climbed carefully down into the chamber; Kira and Corbin followed soon after. We walked to the foot of the river, to a point just before it dropped off into the darkness. There stood a marble pedestal, on top of which rested an ivory slab, into which ten Greek words had been inscribed. Eight words had been engraved on the eight points of a golden compass. Another word was in the center of the compass, and a final word lay at the bottom of the slab, completely alone. Kira traced on the ivory with her finger, reading off the names on the compass, one by one.

"Clio, Euterpe, Thaleia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia, Urania... and there, in the center, Calliope. Queen of the Muses, These... these are the names of her eight sisters."

"That must be her door there," I motioned to the golden doorway across the river.

"And here at the bottom... Tartarus."